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The Politics of Diaspora Management in the Republic of Korea

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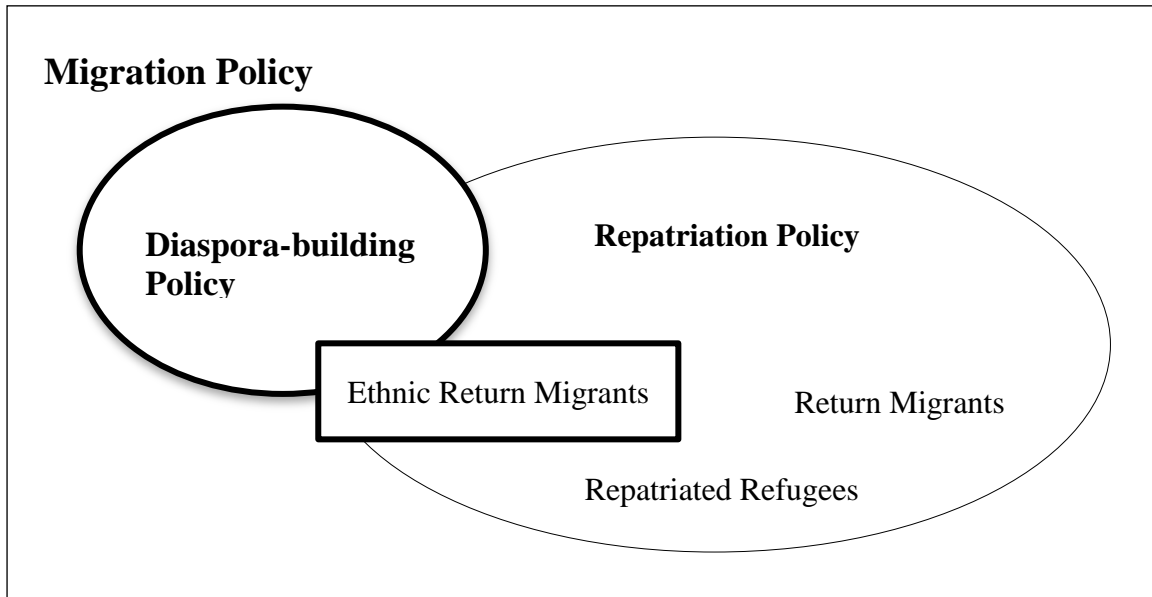
The Republic of Korea has an elaborate diaspora management policy since the 1990s. But what accounts for the variation in policies toward Koreans in China, Japan, North America, and the former Soviet Union? In this issue brief I explore various explanations for this variation: ethnic hierarchy, with some of these communities considered as more purely Korean than others; the timing and reasons behind the emigration of each group; the skills that each community has; the degree of organization abroad; and, finally, the nature of interstate relations and balance of power between South Korea and the respective host states.

Diaspora management is a term I have re-conceptualized to describe both the policies that states follow in order to build links with their diaspora abroad and the policies designed to help with the incorporation and integration of diasporic communities when they “return” home.¹ In particular, I focus on the conditions under which a government treats some of its diasporic communities more favorably—e.g. providing them with incentives to “return” back to the homeland—than others. South Korea fits the characteristics of a country with developed diaspora management policies: it has a clear definition of a “national type”; a population outside of its borders that can fit the criteria of this

definition; and, since the late 1980s, the capacity to design and implement such a policy. These characteristics together with the national security threats that it is facing and its position in global economic competition render it a good case to test my argument outside of the European continent.

But why should we care about this topic? I hold that the politics surrounding diaspora management policies has been relatively understudied and so is the link between migration policy as a whole and ethnic return migration in particular. Diaspora management policies—the combination of diaspora-building and ethnic return migration policies—affect the likelihood of return of members of the diaspora and this movement, in turn, affects a country's migration policy. For example, if we know that Koreans in the US or China are willing to come back, the Republic of Korea may decide that it can afford a restrictive migration policy toward foreign migrants since overseas Koreans are likely to come back and fill market place demands in certain sectors of the Korean economy or even the military. This was in fact the case when thousands of Koreans from China migrated to the Republic of Korea and met the demand for unskilled workers. On top of that, such a development will save the Republic of Korea from the effort that would be needed to incorporate foreigners. This is of course assuming that the overseas Koreans that decide to repatriate are culturally more similar to the core group.² All in all, countries with a developed diaspora management policy are likely to end up with a more restrictive migration policy for foreigners. Moreover, while the world is becoming more globalized and traditional countries of emigration like India, China and Brazil develop economically, they are becoming more and more interested in their diasporas. This process will signal the dawn of a new era in diaspora management policies.

Figure 1. Mapping the Field of Study: *Diaspora Management Policy*



Source: Harris Mylonas, “Ethnic Return Migration, Selective Incentives, and the Right to Freedom of Movement in Post-Cold War Greece,” in Willem Maas, ed., *Democratic Citizenship and the Free Movement of People* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2013), 176.

Concepts and Definitions

Before we turn to the empirics of the case, i.e. the Republic of Korea and its diaspora, it is useful to clarify some terms. The term “diaspora management” captures both policies aiming to cultivate links with co-ethnics abroad as well as policies that aim at attracting certain diasporic communities back home. But what is a *diaspora*? In my state-centric framework, the term diaspora refers to citizens of a state who have emigrated with an intention to live abroad and their descendants, as well as people that are not citizens of their purported homeland but fit the definition of nationhood of that state and have not fully assimilated into another society and their descendants. In this definition, members of a diaspora do not have to act as co-ethnics while they are residing abroad.³ In fact, national states often consider communities that have never lived in the purported homeland or do not keep ties with that homeland as their diaspora. At times a state’s official definition of its diaspora is less inclusive than the definition above. I try to discern when this is part of a conscious policy or just neglect.

Thus, diaspora management policy involves both government efforts to cultivate links with emigrants and their descendants abroad (including in some cases groups of co-ethnics that have never lived in the homeland) as well as policies targeting all or some of the diasporic communities with selective incentives and privileges to attract them back to the homeland and help them with their settlement. This latter component of diaspora management policy is what is usually referred to as *repatriation* policy. But the overlap is partial since a) not all repatriation policies target co-ethnics, b) not all emigrants are considered diaspora members by their respective states, and c) not all diaspora members repatriate voluntarily or as part of a state-planned diaspora policy—one just needs to consider the cases of forced repatriated refugees. Thus, diaspora management comprises diaspora-building policies and ethnic return migration policies (bold lines in the *Figure* above).

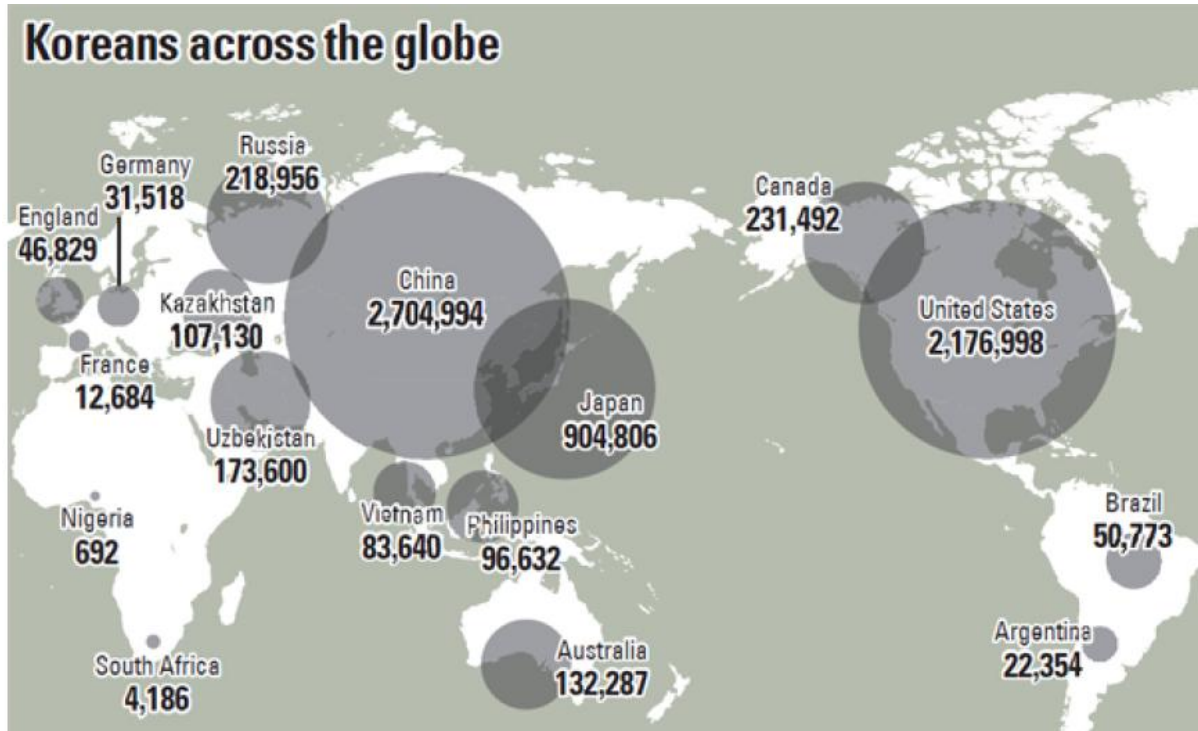
“Mapping” Overseas Koreans

The existence of overseas Koreans may not be the most salient topic in the Republic of Korea today. Korean unification, the relationship with Japan and China, the transfer of wartime operational control of South Korea’s military to the Korean government, domestic political scandals or battles, and concerns about sustainable economic growth may be higher on the list at the moment. But the relationship with the overseas Koreans is a topic of increasing importance for South Koreans since—like most topics in the Republic of Korea—it is directly relevant for Korea’s overall nation-building project. It is linked to debates about military service, adoptee-birth parent reunions, North-South relations and the reintegration of North Korean defectors, nation branding and economic development.⁴

The former President of the Overseas Koreans Foundation,⁵ Kyungkeun Kim, both in my meeting with him and in relevant publications emphasized the importance of the 7.2 million Koreans living abroad in about 175 countries (see *Map* below).⁶ This estimate is based on the definition that was put forward in the Overseas Koreans Foundation Act in the late 1990s. In Article 2 from the Act, it is stated that “Overseas Koreans are all persons of Korean origin, regardless of their nationality, who reside in foreign countries.”⁷ 2.8 million of these hold the Korean nationality and are in fact eligible to vote since a 2010 bill extended voting rights to Korean nationals abroad.⁸ I have identified the

main categories of overseas Koreans,⁹ which I briefly describe below in order of size.

Figure 2. The Global Distribution of the Korean Diaspora in 2011



Source: “World’s widest diaspora born over 100 years ago,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, Oct 2, 2013; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Republic of Korea, 2011.

Note: The reporting team of *Korea Joongang Daily* designed this map based on the original data provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2011.

The largest diasporic community of Koreans can be found in China. They are a little less than 3 million people and are also known as *Joseonjok*. This group is one of the 56 officially recognized minorities in the People’s Republic of China. Besides the *Joseonjok*, which emigrated as early as the 1860s in Chinese provinces of the Qing dynasty and during the Japanese colonization of Korea, a few South Koreans emigrated to China since the early 1990s mainly to pursue economic opportunities there.¹⁰

The second largest group of overseas Koreans includes the ones that live in the United States. Almost 2 million Koreans live in the US, primarily a result of

massive migration following the US Immigration Act that abolished the Asian quota system in 1965. However, a significant Korean overseas community has been in place in Hawaii since 1903.¹¹ A little less than half a million Koreans live in Canada, Australia, and the UK, raising the number of Koreans in the English speaking world to about 2.5 million.

Koreans in Japan include two main groups that amount to a little less than a million people. The first group's presence dates back to Japanese colonization period (1910-1945). These people are also known as *Zainichi* Koreans—ethnic Korean residents of Japan. A portion of *Zainichi* Koreans aligns with the DPRK while the vast majority aligns with the Republic of Korea. Some *Zainichi* Koreans hold the Republic of Korea passports for traveling while some *Zainichi* Koreans are not citizen of the Republic of Korea but have special permanent residency in Japan. But there is a significant number of Koreans that moved to Japan for educational and economic opportunities following the Korean War.¹²

Koreans in the former Soviet Union (Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, etc.) include the *Koryo-in*—descendants of Koreans who moved to Russia in the 19th and early 20th centuries—as well as the Koreans from Sakhalin Island.¹³ Ethnic Koreans live in many other countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brazil.

Finally, Koreans defecting from North Korea to South Korea could technically be included in my analysis given the de facto situation. Many South Koreans, however, would object to this categorization given the fact that Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea includes the entire Korean Peninsula and adjacent islands as its territory, and thus, North Korean defectors are understood as Korean nationals.

Beyond categorization based on the country of residence, we can construct two more categories of overseas Koreans: Korean adoptees—about 160,000 that live primarily in the US, Canada, and other wealthy western European states¹⁴—and Koreans over the age of 60 who are all eligible for the coveted F-4 visa.¹⁵

Explaining Variation in the Treatment of Different Diasporic Communities of Koreans

The Republic of Korea has developed an elaborate diaspora management policy

since the early 1990s. However, as is often the case, this policy was not treating the various groups of overseas Koreans uniformly. For instance, Koreans from the US were treated differently than Koreans in China. Koreans over the age of 60 are able to get citizenship while younger Koreans living abroad are not. Accounting for these puzzles motivates my work.

But what is the range of strategies that a nation-state can follow toward its various diasporic communities? I suggest that the government of a nation-state can choose from the following options:

- neglect its diaspora altogether.
- neglect a specific diasporic community but not others.
- recognize a specific community but have no policy to attract it back.
- strategically neglect a community while at the same time having favorable policies in place for the members of that community. This would be the policy toward the Koreans in China.
- recognize a certain diasporic community and have diaspora building policies but without a preference about whether it stays abroad or comes back. This would probably be the case of Koreans in the US.
- or, recognize a diasporic community and have diaspora building policies but strategically keep them abroad. This policy is apt for cases where the diasporic community is critical in the bilateral relations as a lobbying factor or a hostage.

These are the six different group specific policies that a state can follow towards different diasporic communities. Of course, these options represent ideal types and there may be cases where a mix of two different policies could be pursued toward the same diasporic community. For example, the Republic of Korea has a different policy for overseas Koreans above 60 than those below 60 regardless of their country of residence.

Reading the relevant literature and talking to South Koreans journalists, academics, and policy makers, I derived the following hypotheses that could account for the variation in diaspora management policies toward the various communities of overseas Koreans. One is an argument about *hierarchy of ethnicity*. In other words, the variation in the treatment according to this argument is the result of state and public perceptions about the different communities. Some people are seen as more pure-blooded or as having preserved Korean values abroad while others not. Relatedly, others argue that

their degree of assimilation in the respective host state affects how the South Korean state treats these communities. The size of a community may also affect policy planning. If a community is truly big, a state is less likely to adopt very generous policies for it because all of its members may decide to come back and could affect employment rates in negative ways. Some scholars suggest that diasporic communities themselves organize abroad and lobby their own governments for more favorable policies. Moreover, any initial policy creates feedback effects because once a significant number of members of the diaspora return they can actively lobby the government. Another explanation suggested by state officials has to do with the different needs that the various communities have. Some are facing more difficulties than others. This for example explains the more intensive efforts that the Republic of Korea puts to support schools and Korean language education for less developed communities of Koreans abroad. Finally, the international community is pushing a lot of developing or emerging countries to care more about their diaspora as a part of a migration and development narrative.

The above mentioned factors matter for the form that group specific policies take but I argue that diasporic communities are treated based on the role they have in their host country relative to the role they would have in their purported homeland. Let me unpack this. First, we need to look at the role the diasporic community plays abroad for the sending state. So are Koreans in the US more useful for Korea while they are there or back in the Republic of Korea? Is it more important from an economic, political or geo-political point of view to be there and act as a lobbying group or would they be more useful in the homeland? What would their role be if they were to come back? Would they have a positive role; would they be loyal; or would they be a security threat? Would they amend a deficit in the workforce in a certain sector or become a burden?

The second component of my argument focuses on the bilateral interstate relations between the sending state and the country that is hosting the diasporic community. This, in turn, is interacted with the balance of power between the two—unless the two have friendly relations and then balance of power may not matter as much, such is the case between the Republic of Korea and the United States. But the balance of power definitely matters when you are dealing with an enemy state that is hosting members of your diaspora. It is because the stronger party can dictate the rules of that relationship. This dynamic describes the situation between Korea and China. For example, the Republic of Korea cannot independently dictate the policy of the Republic of Korea vis-à-vis the

Koreans in China exactly because the balance of power is not in South Korea's favor and pursuing an aggressive diaspora-building policy would have too much of a destabilizing effect on their bilateral relations. Such a development would also hurt the economic interests of Korean firms that have invested in China.

Yet another piece of evidence consistent with my argument is that the Republic of Korea estimated the overseas Koreans to be about 1.5 million in 1991, but soon after the normalization of relations with Russia and China, the South Korean state and public opinion "discovered" that its overseas Korean population was a little more than 5 million. The Koreans in China and the former Soviet Union accounted for the difference. These diasporic communities were not even recognized by the Republic of Korea before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formal establishment of diplomatic relations with China in 1992. In the next couple of years, I hope to disentangle the logic underlying the Republic of Korea's diaspora management policy.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views
of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.



Harris Mylonas is an assistant professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University. For the 2008-2009 and 2011-2012 academic years, he was an academy scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. He is an associate editor of *Nationalities Papers* and the vice president of the Association for the Study of Nationalities. Professor Mylonas' book, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees, and Minorities* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), won *The Peter Katzenstein Book Prize* for the best first book in International Relations, Comparative Politics, or Political Economy in 2013. *The Politics of Nation-Building* identifies the conditions in which the governing elites of a state target unassimilated ethnic groups with assimilationist policies instead of granting them minority rights or excluding them from the state. He is currently working on his second book—tentatively entitled *The Politics of Managing Diasporas*—analyzing why some states develop policies to cultivate links with and/or to attract back certain diasporic communities while others do not. Mylonas has published articles in *Security Studies*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Ethnopolitics*, *Harvard International Review*, and in edited volumes. He has also published opinion pieces in international newspapers and magazines (*Los Angeles Times*, *Foreign Policy*, *CNN.com*, *Guardian*, and *Newsweek Japan*, among others). Professor Mylonas received a Ph.D. in Political Science from Yale University.

¹ In my research, I focus on state policies toward diasporas (co-ethnics abroad). Some states have extensive policies on this front while others neglect their diasporic communities. The first question I address is, under what conditions does a state have a diaspora management policy? I argue that states with a clear definition of a “national type,” a population outside of their borders—recent or not—that fits the criteria of this definition, and the capacity to design and implement such a policy are likely to develop a diaspora management policy. Moreover, states that meet the above criteria and at the same time face security threats, economic problems, and/or workforce shortages are more likely to develop diaspora management policy than countries that lack one or more of these factors.

² For more on the distinction between “core” and “non-core” groups, see Harris Mylonas, *The Politics of Nation-Building: Making Co-Nationals, Refugees and Minorities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For the South Korean case, see Chulwoo Lee, “How can you say you’re Korean? Law, Governmentality and National Membership in South Korea,” *Citizenship Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 85-102.

³ For a genealogy of the term diaspora, see R. Brubaker, “The Diaspora’ Diaspora,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (2005): 1-19.

⁴ Hye-Kyung Lee, “The Korean Diaspora and Its Impact on Korea’s Development,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 14, no. 1-2 (2005): 149-168; and Josh DeWind, Eun Mee Kim, Ronald Skeldon, and In-Jin Yoon, “Korean Development and Migration,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 371-388.

⁵ The Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF) was established by the Overseas Koreans Foundation Act to “contribute to helping overseas Koreans to live in the countries of residence as exemplary members of such societies while maintaining national ties” (Overseas Koreans Foundation Act, No. 5313 (1997)). According to Article 23, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade is responsible to guide and supervise the Foundation. The initial Act has been revised several times since 1997.

⁶ Presented at the Inaugural International Conference on Diaspora-Homeland Partnerships, Jerusalem, Israel, June 11-13, 2012.

⁷ Based on my research there is a small difference in the definition that the Overseas Koreans Foundation uses with that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. In particular, the former goes back to ancestors all the way back to three generations while the later extends it to six generations.

⁸ “Overseas Koreans get voting rights,” *The Korea Herald*, March 30, 2010.

⁹ For a more elaborate discussion on these populations, see In-Jin Yoon, “Migration and the Korean Diaspora: A Comparative Description of Five Cases,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 413-435.

¹⁰ For more, See Dong-Hoon Seol and John D. Skrentny, “Ethnic return migration and hierarchical nationhood Korean Chinese foreign workers in South Korea,” *Ethnicities* 9 (2009): 147-174.

¹¹ Zihn Choi, “Early Korean Immigrants to America: Their Role in the Establishment of the Republic of Korea,” *East Asian Review* 14, no. 4 (2002): 43-71.

¹² Sonia Ryang and John Lie, *Diaspora without Homeland: Being Korean in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

¹³ Dae-Sook Suh, ed., *Koreans in the Soviet Union* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1987).

¹⁴ Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Sueyoung L. Song and Richard M. Lee, “The Past and Present Cultural Experiences of Adopted Korean American Adults,” *Adoption Quarterly* 12 (2009): 19-26.

¹⁵ “Issuing F-4 Visas for Overseas Koreans 60-year-old or older,” *Yonhap News*, August 27, 2013.